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Recommended Citation

Brainard, Patricia J. (2009). "White Lies: A Critical Race Study of Power and Privilege," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2009/papers/10>

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White Lies: A Critical Race Study of Power and Privilege

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Abstract: This is a phenomenological study, grounded in Critical Race Theory, of White privilege as experienced through the stories of White people who have struggled to become more racially aware and socially active in dismantling racism and racial privilege.

Introduction

I am teaching a class of young moms who want an alternative high school credential. We have a new student in class and we go around the room to introduce ourselves. We have four White women, one Latina, and one Native American. After one White woman introduces herself, the new student turns to her friend in class and says, "I thought she would have an Indian name like Pocahontas or something." Silence falls on the class and the students look at me. I know that I must address this while maintaining everyone's dignity. Heaviness encompasses my heart as I try to navigate this racialized incident. I wish there were a manual that I could turn to that would direct me and tell me explicitly, "When faced with this racialized incident in class, White teacher, do this." I have had no White role models to fill me with the words and wisdom to address a racialized comment or microaggression (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). I yearn for a play-by-play book.

Adult education is a space in which we immerse the entirety of ourselves – our past and present experiences, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors. Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) state that "...no one is ever completely emancipated from the sociopolitical context that has produced him or her" (p. 308). It seems, then, that the dynamics and tensions of racism and White privilege present in society are present in our adult learning spaces. These are contested ground as truth, reality, ideas, and knowledge are expressed and interpreted by people with multiple cultures and heritages or "sociopolitical contexts."

White people have created divisions in our country using the constructs of race since its inception. We, White people, appear to view racism as a problem of *not being White*, seem to deny responsibility for the status of race relations, and seldom admit or acknowledge the privilege associated with Whiteness. The issue of racism is further complicated because of the benefit inherent to the White majority. We, White people, have a pivotal role we have not yet fulfilled in the deconstruction of racism. "White privilege thus demands the serious attention of every race scholar" (Delgado, 2006, p. 1271).

The purpose of this study was to expand the body of research and literature that explores, explains, and inspires social action that alters the dynamics of racial oppression. More importantly, however, I think its goal was to advocate that White adult educators find additional ways in which to address topics of White privilege and racism explicitly in adult education settings. To identify areas within a field of study that need attention is a challenge. It is looking outside of conventional lenses and shifting a paradigm of thought to search for what might not be there. Delgado (2006) notes that recent race scholarship, "...devote[s] scant attention to two issues that ought to be on the agenda of every serious treatment of race: white privilege and the

place of nonblack groups such as Latinos and Asian Americans in the civil-rights equation” (p. 1271). This study was devoted to the examination of White privilege from within the White community and exploration of what implications the phenomenon of this privilege has for adult education.

My study focused on the lived experiences of White people as they became aware of their privilege and acted in ways to deconstruct or dismantle it. Specifically, my research questions were:

1. How do White people experience being a member of the racially privileged?
2. What are the essential characteristics or elements of an experience that cause a change in consciousness about White privilege?
3. In what ways or to what degree does a change in consciousness regarding White privilege serve as a catalyst to action?

The significance of this research involves the potential to inform and shape pedagogical practices of adult educators. The examination of the phenomenon of White privilege for purposes of describing how White people become conscious of their racial privilege has not been fully explored. The present study will contribute in filling that gap in research. Feagin and O’Brien (2003) support the existence of this gap in research as they write specifically about White men, “...the views, perspectives, and proclivities of this group [White men] have received relatively little detailed attention in research literature or in popular magazines and periodicals” (p. 1).

Theoretical Framework

No research can be free of the experiences and personal history, the *positionality*, of the investigator. The best one can do is to frame the study in such a way that both the value and limitations of one’s experiences are acknowledged and expressed. As I consider my own racial privilege and the privilege of White people in general, I tend to examine social interactions through a specific perspective. That orientation is best described through the tenets or principles of Critical Race Theory, which put “race at the center of critical analysis” (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 1). Racism is so entrenched within our society that it is unnoticeable to White people. Therefore, it is useful to question White people who have addressed this obliviousness within themselves and who pay attention to race to find out why and how they do this.

Critical Race Theory grew out of a movement known as Critical Legal Studies. Civil rights cases flourished after the Civil Rights Movement as the country began to challenge school integration, housing and other forms of discrimination. “New approaches and theories were needed to deal with the color blind, subtle, or institutional forms of racism that were developing and an American public that seemed increasingly tired of hearing about race” (Delgado, 2003, p. 125). These new Critical Legal Studies scholars began to define or construct those new approaches.

By the mid-seventies, “The norms of racial integration had become so powerful that they were taken to define the difference between being enlightened and being backward” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. 2). Enlightenment or innovation and perceived ignorance regarding the best course of action for equal education were powerful divisions in separating civil rights legal strategists. Bell (1976) explored, or perhaps exposed, two significant contradictions in civil rights litigation regarding *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision and the due haste with which states were to comply.

Bell (1976) questioned that integration served the best interests of children of Color. At the time, this was perceived as pro-segregationist, or as Crenshaw, et al., (1995) noted, a backward, non-enlightened position. “...[It] was thus dramatic that he would take on the liberal

ideology of the mainstream civil rights movement by criticizing the effect of the enforcement of *Brown* on the black community” (p. 2). In his own words, Bell argues, “Now that traditional racial balance remedies are becoming increasingly difficult to achieve or maintain, there is tardy concern that racial balance may not be the relief actually desired by the victims of segregated schools” (pp. 471-472). He questioned whether a lawyer in the cases of desegregation could serve the interest of the individuals while at the same time serving the group represented in the class action. He gave personal examples of cases he worked on where the civil rights organizations funding the suit, most notably the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, would not fund a suit that did not involve integration.

In most instances of injustice, the general public is accustomed to identifying victim(s) and perpetrator(s). We punish the perpetrator(s) and assign retribution for the victim(s). As our justice system has evolved we have expanded our understanding to recognize that an entity, such as a corporation, can be a perpetrator to an entity, such as a community. Freeman (1978) explored the dichotomy of victim and perpetrator and the impact these had on *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. Within these two perspectives, Freeman is distinguishing between a systemic stance of victim and perpetrator and an individual one. If we view discrimination as single, individual acts, then it allows us to escape a collective or a societal responsibility. We identify a single victim and we search out the perpetrator(s) and punish them. The risk of this view, Freeman writes, is that “the perpetrator perspective presupposes a world composed of atomistic individuals whose actions are outside of and apart from the social fabric and without historical continuity” (p. 1054). This view also serves the White majority in that it reinforces an individual racist ideology, rather than a systemic definition of racism.

Critical Race Theory challenges three of our fundamental beliefs about racial injustice. The first “...is that ‘blindness’ to race will eliminate racism” (Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002, p. 1). These authors argue that this blindness generates from the individualism many scholars have that leads to resisting group identity. The second challenge is that racism resides in our social *systems* rather than in *individuals*, although certainly individuals can and are racist, Critical Race Theory challenges that it resides *only* in individuals. Additionally, it challenges the premise that “one can fight racism without paying attention to sexism, homophobia, economic exploitation, and other forms of oppression or injustice.” In other words, we are more than just our racial identities.

Research Design

This was a qualitative inquiry and was exploratory and descriptive in nature. It built on the context and setting of the participants’ lived feelings, actions, and beliefs in an attempt to search for a deeper meaning of the phenomenon of White privilege and its relationship to racism. As a phenomenological study of White privilege, I examined the elements that formed that experience with participants in the United States. Moustakas (1994) describes that phenomenology “involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” and “the aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). Just as it is important that people of Color be the authority on their own experience of oppression, White people can be one authority on perpetuating the circumstances, systems, and socio-political structures that continue the oppression that results in the privileging of White people.

I interviewed seven White people for this study. Purposive sampling targeted those White people who acknowledged their racial privilege and were actively working to dismantle or diminish this phenomenon. Participants ranged in age from 38 to 81; two were males and five

were females; four lived in the Northeast and three in the Midwest; and all were college educated, had graduate degrees, and were middle to upper class.

Discussion of the Findings

There are seven significant findings in this study. These are in respect to participants' growth and development of racial awareness, White privilege, and potential for social action.

Black/White Binary

Participants talked about their White identity and understanding of privilege by beginning with stories of their experiences with Black people. There are historical and social roots for this phenomenon. Much of our K-12 education history content focused on White European contributions to the formation and stability of our country. In contrast, when other cultures or races were studied the focus was primarily on African Americans, and on their suffering as opposed to contributions; they were portrayed as victims, not actors. In addition to describing experiences with Black people, participants spoke of incidents when they noticed they were White by noticing when others around them were *not* White.

Limited Contact

Participants in the study grew up in predominantly White settings with little contact with people of Color. Their critical incidents involved directly or indirectly experiences with people of Color. They did not grow in their understanding of racial privilege through theoretical applications or abstractions. They learned primarily, sometimes painfully, when they were in direct contact with people of Color. In many cases, it was a person of Color who *taught* them. This mentorship was critical to their understanding. I'm not suggesting it is the responsibility of people of Color to teach White people about racism, but participants attributed much of their learning to their level of engagement and deep relationships they had with a few people of Color.

Convergence of Critical Incident Elements

Qualitative researchers engage in study to learn or discover, generally through inductive methods, rather than confirm what they already know or suspect, through deductive methods. Although I entered into the research with the qualitative ideal, I did imagine that I would find separate elements of racialized experiences that could be combined to magically bestow on White people a level of consciousness needed to impede or eradicate racism. Of course I found no magical or miraculous solution. I did find common elements within participants' stories that contributed to and influenced their growth and development in their understanding of racial privilege. More importantly and perhaps surprisingly, I found that these elements did not exist in isolation. Instead, there seemed to be a convergence of these elements that, when combined, fostered growth. These elements were: 1) a critical incident that seemed transformative in nature and challenged the participants previous assumptions; 2) each involved a mentor-type relationship with a person of Color; 3) participants experienced some kind of moral or ethical anguish or regret; and 4) each participant had a relational nature and deep commitment to the growth of themselves and others.

Deep Reflection

These participants were deep thinkers and observers. They reflected not only on their own behavior, but on the impact their behavior had on others around them. This was not accidental; they deliberately engaged in a reflective routine. Each created a different kind of

process but a deliberate and learned routine was the common factor. One participant seemed to have the most developed process and described it as “going to the mirror.” When a situation happened in which she felt inadequate to respond, she would go to a mirror and practice responses until she found one she could live with and then practiced it over and over until it was second nature to her. All the other participants share, in some degree, the reflective process. The reflection was repetitive, explicit, involved dialogue with themselves or someone else. These emanated from a deep, inner place, and ended with a change in future behavior. Reflection was not limited to racial privilege and in fact started as they evaluated their own behavior in other aspects of their lives. It was applied consciously to the critical racialized incidents they experienced. This reflection is noteworthy because of its deliberate and pervasive nature.

Deep Empathy

As participants reflected about the critical racialized experiences they had, they began to imagine what it would be like to not be White. The act of thinking and *placing* themselves in a person of Color’s circumstances was the way in which they learned empathy. It was in *imagining* the struggle of another person that they began to appreciate how circumstances shape other realities. It was in *feeling* discomfort, pain, and/or sadness that they began to appreciate how circumstances build upon each other to create resentment and pain that can’t be explained by a single experience. It was in *questioning* the normalcy of their own experiences that they began to believe that multiple realities can co-exist, and to believe that no reality is less valuable than another. Participants developed empathy with their hearts, not their minds.

Growth is Ongoing

Awareness and action built upon each other and grew over time for these participants. Although the stories did not unfold in a linear fashion, patterns that emerged for participants aligned with my own experiences in that I have gone back and forth between times of great awareness and social action to naïveté and obliviousness. As participants became aware of their own racism and privilege, they could not go back to *not knowing*. This pattern of growth seemed erratic, unpredictable, and inconsistent; this wasn’t a smooth process. The nature of this growth may have been because of the reflection and support from people of Color the participant received after the critical incident. Although some participants were able to reflect on their behavior when they were involved in the critical incident, most reflection took place afterwards. Sometimes it was years after. The real significance here is that the growth was fluid and always in a more enlightened or evolved direction.

Good, Good, Good Intentions of White people

Does intention matter? In the long run, does my intent to do no harm somehow make up for the harm I do? Participants demonstrated moral distress in some of their stories. In fact some stories continued to be emotional as they retold them. Some felt shame about past actions or inactions and some felt great regret and a desire to go back and make things right. One participant spoke about how she believes that most people want to do the right thing and the implication was that the right thing was not to be racist. Most White people don’t want to be labeled racist and the participants in this study were no exception. Most of the participants acknowledged that this was a difficult subject to talk about and those that had not met me before said that it was particularly difficult to tell some of their stories to a stranger.

Implications for Adult Education

This research has implications for adult educators who teach towards anti-racism and social justice. Critical Race Theorists (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) suggest that we can no longer wait for White people to learn about racial privilege through the natural course of their lives; we must do more. Additionally, White people, with an interest in dismantling or exploring White privilege have few models to draw upon when navigating racialized experiences. By explicitly constructing instructional activities that build in the opportunities for dialogue and relationships, building awareness and experience, developing empathy, and practicing reflection related to race for White adult learners, we can accelerate the dismantling of racism. Through this explicit and directed instruction, White adult learners can learn techniques necessary to take action to change their personal social interactions and learn how to influence and model this for others. As White adult educators, we can be the role models and assist in the construction of the “play-by-play book.”

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